



Photos by MARLENE KARAS / Staff

Fayette County firefighters in the Tyrone division (from left), Jason Wilcox, Mike Hadden, Heath Routon and Mark Johnson, collect items to distribute to needy families — not just at Christmas-time, but year-round.

Firefighter starts in-house charity

By ABBY G. BRUNKS
abrunksa@ajc.com

Fayette County firefighters and emergency personnel do more than fight fires and save lives.

Throughout the year, department employees donate their own items, such as food and clothing, to local non-profit organizations.

Firefighter Mark Johnson, who came up with the name Helping the Helpers for the collection effort, is the only person who picks up and delivers the goods.

Johnson said it's not a service available to the public, but rather for employees from every rank within the department.

"I'm one person with one truck, and we can't have stuff dropped off at the fire stations," he said. "We don't have room to store it, and it would get in the way."

The concept of Helping the Helpers started with a department meeting last year. Johnson said the firefighters were looking for a way to help families in need of basic necessities.

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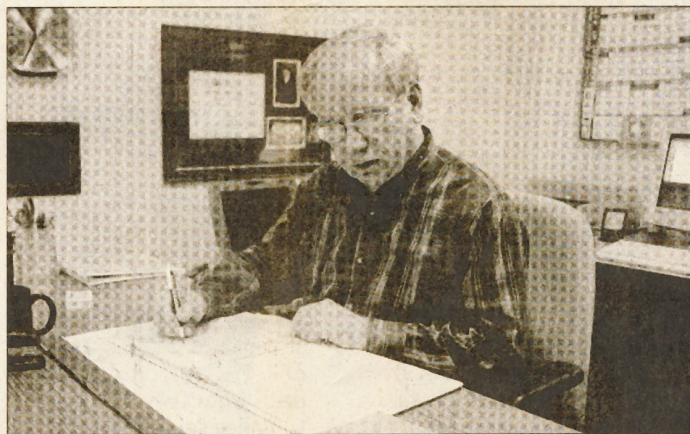
"This is so important because any firefighter or police officer knows we find a lot of people in our community in need, like for clothes or food," he said. "They are barely getting by because maybe they lost a home in a fire or a single mom is ill and they just need a little help."

The only problem was where to store the donated items Fire Department personnel bring in. That's when department members went to agencies like Braelinn Community Services and Fayette Samaritans — places that had room for storage, Johnson said.

John Hamblen is executive director of Braelinn Community Services, an agency that provides assistance to Fayette County families.

"Mark is a one-man distribution service, a champion in meeting needs," he said. "It's his way of helping in the community."

While Braelinn Community Services receives donations from many groups, Hamblen said Johnson did something



John Hamblen, executive director of Braelinn Community Services, allows donations to be stored at the agency.

different in the beginning.

"He actually interviewed us to be sure that what he provided would be utilized," he said. "He carefully selected who would get the donations because he wanted to work with agencies in the county that were making a difference."

But there's more. Johnson not only picks up and delivers, but he also sorts and keeps an inventory of the items.

Each month, Johnson said he sends out a form that

shows what was collected and where it went.

"We see the results of how those organizations help families after a crisis," he said. "And it's nice to know that we've been able to help."

Fayette Fire and Emergency Services Director Jack Kraakeel said Johnson is a person who does what he believes in.

"Some guys play golf, but Mark plays Santa Claus all year long and distributes to those in need," he said. "Mark is our St. Nick."